

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY PARIS
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TAGS: ETRN, UK, FR

SUBJECT: CONCORDE

1. FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF AN EDITORIAL ON CONCORDE IN
THE APRIL 24 WASHINGTON POST:

2. QUOTE IT HAS BEEN OBVIOUS FOR SOME TIME THAT MORE
DEBATE OVER SUPERSONIC AIRLINERS WAS INEVITABLE. THE
DECISION SOME YEARS AGO BY THE BRITISH AND FRENCH GOVERN-
MENTS TO PROCEED WITH DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCORDE MEANT
THAT SOONER OR LATER THEY WOULD ASK PERMISSION TO FLY THE
PLANE IN AND OUT OF AMERICAN AIRPORTS ON A REGULAR BASIS.
JUST SUCH A REQUEST BY BRITISH AIRWAYS AND AIR FRANCE IS
NOW PENDING BEFORE THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION.
THE TWO AIRLINES WANT TO START REGULAR SERVICE WITH THE
CONCORDE NEXT JANUARY ACROSS THE NORTH ATLANTIC FROM NEW
YORK AND WASHINGTON. THESE REQUESTS HAVE REACTIVATED ALL
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THE OLD ARGUMENTS -- ABOUT POLLUTION AND THE MISALLOCATION

OF RESOURCES ON ONE SIDE, AND ABOUT TECHNOLOGICAL STAGNATION ON THE OTHER. BUT THE QUESTION IS DIFFERENT NOW THAN IT WAS IN 1971 WHEN CONGRESS SCUTTLED THE AMERICAN SST. THE QUESTION NOW IS NOT WHETHER THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT SHOULD SUBSIDIZE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AMERICAN SUPERSONIC TRANSPORT. INSTEAD, IT IS WHETHER SUCH PLANES, NOW THAT THEY EXIST, SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO LAND IN THE UNITED STATES. OUR VIEW ON THE FORMER QUESTION WAS AND IS THAT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD NOT UNDERWRITE SUCH AIRPLANES. BUT OUR VIEW ON THE LATTER QUESTION IS THAT THE CONCORDE SHOULD BE GRANTED LANDING RIGHTS.

PERHAPS THE PLACE TO BEGIN ANALYSIS OF THIS QUITE DIFFERENT SITUATION IS WITH ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL OBJECTIONS TO CONSTRUCTION OF THE SST IN 1971. AT THE TIME THERE WAS BOTH A FEAR OF, AND A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT, THE IMPACT OF ITS POLLUTANTS -- NOISE, DIRT AND NOXIOUS GASES -- ON THE WORLD'S ENVIRONMENT. SEVERAL THINGS HAVE HAPPENED TO THAT OBJECTION IN THE YEARS SINCE. ONE OF THEM IS A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE IN THE KNOWLEDGE AVAILABLE, WHICH INDICATES TO US THAT THE CONCORDE IS NOT NEARLY AS GREAT A THREAT TO THE ENVIRONMENT AS THE FOES OF THE SST FEARED A COMMERCIAL SUPERSONIC AIRPLANE WOULD BE. THIS IS NOT TO SUGGEST THAT THERE ARE NO ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS WITH THE CONCORDE. IT IS NOISIER THAN OTHER COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT NOW BEING PRODUCED. AND IT WILL MAKE A CONTRIBUTION, ALBEIT SMALL, TO THE OZONE PROBLEM.

AS BEST WE CAN MAKE OUT FROM THE DATA AVAILABLE, THE CONCORDE MAKES SLIGHTLY LESS NOISE LANDING THAN DO SOME OF THE 707'S AND DC-8'S NOW FLYING, SLIGHTLY MORE NOISE THAN THOSE PLANES MAKE TAKING OFF AND SUBSTANTIALLY MORE NOISE WHILE ON THE GROUND. QUITE CLEARLY, THE CONCORDE DOES NOT MEET THE NOISE STANDARDS THE FAA IS IN THE PROCESS OF PUTTING INTO EFFECT, BUT NEITHER DO MANY OTHER AIRPLANES NOW FLYING. THE BRITISH AND FRENCH ARGUE PERSUASIVELY THAT THEY HAVE INVESTED MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN THE CONCORDE AND THAT IT IS UNFAIR TO REQUIRE THEIR AIRCRAFT TO MEET STANDARDS NOT IN EXISTENCE WHEN IT WAS PLANNED, ESPECIALLY SINCE IT DOES MEET THE STANDARDS THAT

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THEN EXISTED.

THE OZONE PROBLEM, TO LUMP UNDER ONE PHRASE ALL THE STRATOSPHERE PROBLEMS, IS FAR MORE COMPLEX. ON THIS THE DATA INDICATES THAT A FLEET OF 30 OR SO SUPERSONIC TRANSPORTS WOULD PRODUCE NO DETECTABLE CHANGES. LARGER FLEETS WOULD. BUT IT WOULD TAKE A VERY LARGE FLEET TO CREATE THE CHANGES ALREADY THREATENED BY CONTINUED USE AT PRESENT

LEVELS OF AEROSOL CANS. IN THE LONG RUN, IF MORE TRAVEL--
MILITARY AS WELL AS CIVILIAN -- IS TO BE AT SUCH HEIGHTS
ABOVE THE EARTH, SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES IN JET ENGINES WILL
BE REQUIRED. IN THE SHORT RUN, WITH THE FLEET OF
CONCORDES NOW PLANNED, THE DANGERS SEEM SO SMALL AS TO BE
ALMOST NONEXISTENT. IN ANY EVENT, THE SAME DANGERS WILL
ARISE IF THE CONCORDES ARE FLOWN ANYWHERE, WHETHER OR NOT
THEY LAND IN THE UNITED STATES.

THESE FACTORS, TOGETHER WITH THE NEED FOR COOPERATION
BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS, LEAD US TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE
FAA SHOULD CERTIFY THE CONCORDE FOR LANDING IN THE NUMBERS
NOW REQUESTED -- UP TO FOUR FLIGHTS A DAY AT KENNEDY AND
TWO A DAY AT DULLES. WEIGHING IN HEAVILY ON THE CONCORDE'S
SIDE IS THE IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, PARTICULARLY
IN THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR AVIATION THAT A DENIAL OF PERMIS-
SION TO LAND WOULD HAVE. THE BRITISH AND FRENCH GOVERN-
MENTS ARE COMMITTED HEAVILY TO THIS PROJECT. AN AMERICAN
REFUSAL TO ACCEPT A PLANE THAT MEETS INTERNATIONALLY
AGREED UPON STANDARDS COULD WELL THROW THE WHOLE STRUCTURE
OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL INTO DISARRAY.

THE REMAINING QUESTION ABOUT THE CONCORDE IS: WHO NEEDS
IT? THERE IS, WITHOUT DOUBT, SUBSTANCE IN THE ARGUMENT
THAT THE ADVENT OF THE CONCORDE IS A STEP IN TRAVEL THAT
IS TOTALLY UNNECESSARY. FOR MOST PEOPLE WHO CROSS THE
ATLANTIC THE TIME SAVINGS (3-1/2 HOURS V. 7 HOURS) WILL
NOT BE WORTH THE EXTRA COST. FOR A FEW, MOSTLY BUSINESS-
MEN, IT MAY BE. FOR THOSE WHO FLY THE PACIFIC, THE IMPACT
IS MUCH GREATER - 9 HOURS FROM LOS ANGELES TO SYDNEY
INSTEAD OF ALMOST 18. WE DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT THE CON-
CORDE WILL BE A SMASHING ECONOMIC SUCCESS. ITS INITIAL
COST (AROUND \$70 MILLION PER PLANE) AND ITS OPERATING
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COSTS WILL KEEP TICKET PRICES VERY HIGH. THAT, ALONE,
WILL RESTRICT THE NUMBER OF SUCH PLANES IN USE. IF SUPER-
SONIC TRAVEL IS TO BECOME DOMINANT IN FUTURE YEARS, THAT
DOMINATION WILL HAVE TO WAIT ON DEVELOPMENT OF ANOTHER
KIND OF AIRPLANE. FOR PRECISELY THAT REASON, THE FAA
SHOULD COUPLE ITS CERTIFICATION WITH A WARNING THAT IT
WILL IMPOSE STRICTER STANDARDS ON FUTURE CERTIFICATIONS
INVOLVING ANY SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE BEYOND THE 16 PLANES
NOW CONTEMPLATED. BY WRITING IN WARNINGS ON THE CERTIFI-
CATION OF THE CONCORDE, THE FAA CAN PUT THE AVIATION
WORLD ON NOTICE THAT ANY SUCH PLANE WILL HAVE TO MEET MUCH
MORE STRINGENT ENVIRONMENTAL REQUIREMENTS. UNQUOTE. KISSINGER

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